

# Curtains in the Middle and Late Byzantine House

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Seduced by the opulent spectacles evoked in the tenth-century *De cerimoniis aulae byzantinae*, or *Book of Ceremonies*, with its ubiquitous references to the ritual use of *bela* (βῆλα), one is tempted to focus on the ability of curtains in medieval Byzantium to endow other artifacts, persons, and spaces with mystery, desirability, and, not least, sacredness.<sup>1</sup> This symbolic potency stems from the curtains' primary function as partitions and screens that separate and conceal even as they offer the promise of admittance and revelation, tantalizing the viewer with their subtle movements and with filtered light and sound. The Byzantines themselves were well aware of the performative and symbolic potential of curtains, as evidenced by their prominence in imperial and religious ceremonies and by their widespread use as symbols, metaphors, and dramatic props in Byzantine artistic and literary contexts.<sup>2</sup> The

visibility of curtains in imperial and religious spaces and rites, their common occurrence in Byzantine art and literature, and the widespread use of textile furnishings in middle and late Byzantine houses as documented by Nicolas Oikonomides in his seminal article of 1990 have served to compound the impression that curtains were a more or less ubiquitous feature of domestic spaces and of men's and women's daily experience of these

1 On the capacity of objects to shape expectations and behavior, see D. Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality*, ed. D. Miller (Durham, NC, 2005), 5.

2 For the use of curtains in imperial ceremonial, see especially O. Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell: Vom oströmischen Staats- und Reichsgedanken* (Jena, 1938; repr. Darmstadt, 1956), 55–57; M. J. Featherstone, "The Chrysotriklinos Seen through *De Cerimoniis*," in *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. L. M. Hoffmann (Wiesbaden, 2005), 845–52, esp. 849; H. Maguire, "Art, Ceremony, and Spiritual Authority at the Byzantine Court," in *The Byzantine Court: Source of Power and Culture; Papers from the Second International Sevgi Göniül Byzantine Studies Symposium*, ed. A. Ödekan, N. Necipoğlu, and E.

Akyürek (Istanbul, 2013), 111–21; M. G. Parani, "Mediating Presence: Curtains in Middle and Late Byzantine Imperial Ceremonial and Portraiture," *BMGS* 42, no. 1 (2018): 1–25. For the use of curtains in church, see, e.g., R. F. Taft, "The Decline of Communion in Byzantium and the Distancing of the Congregation from the Liturgical Action: Cause, Effect, or Neither?," in *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*, ed. S. E. J. Gerstel (Washington, DC, 2006), 40–49; B. Caseau, "Experiencing the Sacred," in *Experiencing Byzantium: Papers from the 44th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Newcastle and Durham, April 2011*, ed. C. Nesbitt and M. Jackson (Farnham, UK, 2013), 64–69. For curtains in art, see the useful though somewhat dated overview by J. K. Eberlein, *Apparitio regis—revelatio veritatis: Studien zur Darstellung des Vorhangs in der bildenden Kunst von der Spätantike bis zum Ende des Mittelalters* (Wiesbaden, 1982). To my knowledge, with the significant exception of the Temple's curtain as a *typos* of Christ's flesh, "woven" by the Theotokos at the Incarnation and "torn" at the time of Christ's death on the Cross, harking back to Hebrews 10:20, the role of the curtain as a symbol or metaphor in Byzantine literary contexts has not yet been explored systematically. Still, even a superficial search of the Greek terms βῆλον, κο(ν)ορίνα, παραπέτασμα, καταπέτασμα, and βηλόθυρον in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* reveals its popularity.

spaces in medieval Byzantium.<sup>3</sup> This assumption might appear even more justified if the well-documented—and more thoroughly studied—use of curtains in early Byzantine domestic spaces is also brought into the picture.<sup>4</sup> However, postulating continuity of practice from the early Byzantine period into the medieval one is risky, not to say methodologically unsound, especially since the physical and social frame for the use of the domestic curtain—the Byzantine house and the lifestyle of its inhabitants—underwent significant changes over time.<sup>5</sup> In order to test the validity of the supposition that curtains constituted (or continued to

constitute) common household furnishings in medieval Byzantium, one needs to examine more closely the relevant archaeological, artistic, and written evidence. In the paragraphs that follow, I will discuss these three different categories of data separately before trying to draw some general conclusions.

As opposed to wall hangings, which were hung flat or nearly flat against a unified surface, curtains in the home were meant to be suspended from doorways and other openings, such as the intercolumniations of an arcade or a wall niche.<sup>6</sup> Curtains do not appear to have been suspended in front of windows, especially not those located high up in the walls and meant to allow daylight and fresh air into a room.<sup>7</sup> As physical barriers and screens, curtains would have served as a relatively simple means of directing movement and of controlling sensory access by manipulating hearing and vision. Furthermore, they could have been used to protect interior spaces from extreme cold and heat depending on the season, to regulate the lighting of interiors and to muffle sounds for both ritual and mundane purposes, and to shield the inhabitants and their possessions from dust and insects. They could have also helped to articulate larger rooms by dividing them into smaller segments and to screen off certain areas in the house dedicated to specific functions that required privacy or restricted access. Not least, they would have contributed to the adornment of the spaces in which they were hung, either in their own right or as a backdrop or frame for the display of objects or persons, thus

3 N. Oikonomides, “The Contents of the Byzantine House from the Eleventh to the Fifteenth Century,” *DOP* 44 (1990): 209, 212–14. For a general overview of the central role of textiles in Byzantine society, including a discussion of how the material attributes of cloth affected the practical and connotative aspects of its use for dress and soft furnishings, see M. M. Fulghum, “Under Wraps: Byzantine Textiles as Major and Minor Arts,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 9, no. 1 (2001–2): 13–33.

4 E. D. Maguire, H. P. Maguire, and M. J. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Urbana, IL, 1989), 45–47; A. De Moor and C. Fluck, eds., *Clothing the House: Furnishing Textiles of the 1st Millennium AD from Egypt and Neighbouring Countries; Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Research Group “Textiles from the Nile Valley,” Antwerp, 6–7 October 2007* (Tiel, 2009); J. W. Stephenson, “Veiling the Late Roman House,” *Textile History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 3–31. See also K. Colburn, “Loops, Tabs, and Reinforced Edges: Evidence for Textiles as Architectural Elements,” *DOP* 73 (2019): 187–216.

5 Despite significant advances in recent years, the study of domestic architecture and the use of domestic space during the middle and late Byzantine periods still has a long way to go: C. Bouras, “Houses in Byzantium,” *ΔΧΑΕ* 11 (1982–83): 1–26; L. Sigalos, “Middle and Late Byzantine Houses in Greece (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries),” in *Secular Buildings and the Archaeology of Everyday Life in the Byzantine Empire*, ed. K. Dark (Oxford, 2004), 53–81; idem, *Housing in Medieval and Post-Medieval Greece* (Oxford, 2004); K. Kourelis, “The Rural House in the Medieval Peloponnese: An Archaeological Reassessment of Byzantine Domestic Architecture,” in *Archaeology in Architecture: Studies in Honor of Cecil L. Striker*, ed. J. J. Emerick and D. M. Deliyannis (Mainz, 2005), 119–28; V. Kalas, “Cappadocia’s Rock-Cut Courtyard Complexes: A Case Study for Domestic Architecture in Byzantium,” in *Housing in Late Antiquity: From Palaces to Shops*, ed. L. Lavan, L. Özgenel, and A. Sarantis (Leiden, 2007), 393–414; S. Ellis, “The Middle Byzantine House and Family: A Reappraisal,” in *Approaches to the Byzantine Family*, ed. L. Brubaker and S. Tougher (Farnham, UK, 2013), 247–72; P. Niewöhner, “The Late Late Antique Origins of Byzantine Palace Architecture,” in *The Emperor’s House: Palaces from Augustus to the Age of Absolutism*, ed. M. Featherstone, J.-M. Spieser, G. Tanman, and U. Wulf-Rheidt (Berlin, 2015), 31–52. See also K. Kourelis, “Wool and Rubble Walls: Domestic Archaeology in the Medieval Peloponnese,” *DOP* 73 (2019): 165–185.

6 On the functional difference between wall hangings and curtains, see, e.g., S. Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit* (Riggisberg, Switzerland, 2004), 25, 80 (English trans. at 459, 461), and eadem, “(Wall-)Hangings depicted in Late Antique Works of Art? The Question of Function,” in De Moor and Fluck, *Clothing the House*, 146–54.

7 On the unlikelihood of window curtains, see S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley, CA, 1967–93), 4:117–18. In depictions of the Hospitality of Abraham in certain middle Byzantine illuminated Octateuchs, Sarah observes the proceedings through a curtained window (K. Weitzmann and M. Bernabò, *The Byzantine Octateuchs*, 2 vols. [Princeton, NJ, 1999], 2: figs. 262–64), but this cannot be taken as evidence for the use of window curtains in Byzantium, given the theological symbolism of both window and curtain in this specific iconographic context, on which see M. Meyer, “The Window of Testimony: A Sign of Physical or Spiritual Conception?,” in *Interactions: Artistic Interchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*, ed. C. Hourihane (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 244–59.

affording aesthetic pleasure and imparting a sense of solemnity, opulence, warmth, or intimacy, depending on the context. One could claim that, in terms of potential uses, the domestic curtain was as pliable and fluid as the cloth from which it was made. But what is the actual evidence for the presence and use of curtains in middle and late Byzantine houses, be they the abodes of villagers, the urban residences of the middle and upper classes, or the imperial palace itself?

### The Archaeological Evidence

Beginning our inquiry with the archaeological evidence, so far I have not come across any extant textile dating from the ninth to the fifteenth century that can be securely identified as a domestic as opposed to an ecclesiastical curtain, in clear contrast to the period of late antiquity, which has yielded a number of domestic curtains and fragments thereof, mostly from Egypt.<sup>8</sup> It seems likely that at least some of the numerous ninth- to twelfth-century Byzantine silk fragments that are preserved mostly in western European ecclesiastical treasuries may have originally belonged to curtains. This is, however, difficult to establish given that, to my knowledge, none has preserved evidence of sewn-on loops or other means of suspension. Other criteria that have been proposed for the identification of curtains through the study of late antique textile fragments, such as the thinness and the flexibility of the cloth—which would have allowed the curtain to be drawn back and secured to the side with ease—are not particularly useful in identifying the original function of a silk fragment, given that these properties were equally desirable for fabrics destined for other uses, for instance clothing.<sup>9</sup> The size of the textile fragment and the size of the pattern adorning it might provide a more secure indication as to its original function. It has been suggested, for example, that small repeating patterns would have been more appropriate for curtains, since large-scale patterns would have lost their impact on the viewer when the curtain was open, but even this

criterion is not fail-safe. As John Stephenson has correctly observed while discussing late antique materials, curtains functioning as concealing screens rather than as points of regular physical access could have very well been adorned with large-scale patterns;<sup>10</sup> indeed, the fourteenth-century bema-door curtain of Chilandar Monastery on Mount Athos features a large composition, namely Christ as High Priest flanked by Saints John Chrysostom and Basil and two angels holding labara.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, then, we cannot dismiss the possibility that some of the larger middle Byzantine silk fragments exhibiting large-scale figural patterns may have come from curtains. The last of the proposed criteria for the identification of curtain fragments is that their decoration should be clearly visible from both sides; such a feature would have been especially relevant for curtains that marked a frequently used passage, and therefore were not meant to be viewed primarily from one specific side.<sup>12</sup> As pointed out to me by Julia Galliker, the two-color, two-weft compound weave employed for the production of some middle Byzantine silks did result in fabrics that were legible on both sides, though on the reverse the pattern was not as sharp as on the obverse. However, given that this effect was a “by-product,” as Galliker calls it, of the specific technique, it would be dangerous to extrapolate original intended use from this alone, just as it would be to reject the possibility that other silks produced using techniques that did not result in a readable reverse were not used as curtains.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to actual curtains, Roman and late antique archaeological contexts have also yielded evidence of wall fixtures such as rods, rings, hooks, and

8 For late antique curtains, in addition to the works cited in note 4 above, see V. Gervers, “An Early Christian Curtain in the Royal Ontario Museum,” in *Studies in Textile History: In Memory of Harold B. Burnham*, ed. V. Gervers (Toronto, 1977), 56–81, and Schrenk, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes*, 79–125.

9 For a critical discussion of these criteria, see Stephenson, “Veiling the Late Roman House,” 12–18, with detailed bibliography.

10 Ibid., 14–15.

11 This rare extant medieval example of an ecclesiastical curtain was donated to the *katholikon* of the Athonite monastery in 1398/99 by the nun Jefimija, see S. Smolčić-Makuljević, “Hilandarska katapetazma monahinje Jefimije,” in *Osam vekova Hilandara: Istorija, duhovni život, književnost, umetnost i arhitektura*, ed. V. Korać (Belgrade, 2000), 693–701; I. Drpić, “Jefimija the Nun: A Reappraisal,” in *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Byzantine Studies, Belgrade, 22–27 August 2016: Round Tables*, ed. B. Krsmanović and L. Milanović (Belgrade, 2016), 921–25. Note that the curtain’s decoration was executed in embroidery, making it rather stiff, in defiance of the criterion of flexibility mentioned above.

12 Stephenson, “Veiling the Late Roman House,” 12–14.

13 Pers. comm. I am very grateful to Dr. Galliker for generously sharing with me her expertise on this aspect of middle Byzantine silk weaving.

wall brackets made of metal or horn, all of which would have been used for the suspension and securing of curtains.<sup>14</sup> Thus far I have been unable to locate references to comparable items in publications of excavated domestic middle and late Byzantine contexts, but future systematic archaeological investigations of Byzantine houses might prove more fruitful in this respect. In the meantime, in the case of houses where the walls have been preserved at a sufficient height and in an adequate condition, one might look for traces that could indicate the former presence of a curtain, such as grooves or holes on either side of openings or above lintels.<sup>15</sup> One area with a potential to yield results in this respect is Cappadocia, where in recent decades a number of impressive domestic rock-cut complexes have been identified, dating mostly to the tenth and eleventh centuries. Identifying which of the extant scars on the walls can be attributed to the Byzantine phases of these complexes would be challenging but not impossible.<sup>16</sup> At the impressive Selime Kalesi, for example, lines of grooves on the intrados of the arches of the west gallery of Hall 1 indicate that these were originally sealed off by screens that were probably made of wood, a useful reminder that not all interior partitions in the Byzantine house need have been made of fabric.<sup>17</sup>

In discussions of the use of curtains in Greek, Roman, and even early Byzantine houses, the absence of sockets from the thresholds of interior doorways

(where a wooden door's axle would be) is sometimes taken as an indication that curtains were used instead.<sup>18</sup> However, such an argument *ex silentio* is problematic: not all interior openings within a house need have been screened. As Lefteris Sigalos has observed in the case of certain excavated and surveyed Byzantine houses, the location of interior doorways with a view to controlling visibility from the front entrance and the manipulation of natural and artificial lighting would have ensured the privacy of the inner spaces of the house, without the need for a physical screen.<sup>19</sup> Besides, if such a screen had existed, it was not necessarily a textile. On the other hand, it is useful to remember that, in early Byzantine times at least, the presence of a solid door did not automatically preclude the suspension of a curtain from the selfsame doorway: from the ecclesiastical sphere, the examples of the doors of the Eufasian basilica at Poreč and those leading from the inner narthex into the naos at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople come readily to mind.<sup>20</sup> In one of the early Byzantine recensions of the *Alexander Romance* (recension λ), a combination of curtains (*kourtinai*) and door marks the entrance into an audience hall of Queen Kandake's palace.<sup>21</sup> In all these cases curtain and door together are encountered in inner doorways meant for the admission of visitors into the presence of authority, human or divine. The two successive barriers pace and punctuate the gradual admittance of the visitor, with the curtain—being a movable and permeable screen—conveying the possibility of entrance even when the solid doors behind it were closed.<sup>22</sup> If such an arrangement did exist in actual as opposed to imaginary palaces, one would expect to

14 Maguire, Maguire, and Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers*, no. 3; P. Grossmann, "Late Antique Architecture in Egypt: Evidence of Textile Decoration," in De Moor and Fluck, *Clothing the House*, 34, fig. 30; Stephenson, "Veiling the Late Roman House," 18; M. Martiniani-Reber, ed., *Donation Janet Zakos: De Rome à Byzance* (Geneva, 2015), no. 46.

15 See Stephenson, "Veiling the Late Roman House," 18. The technical study of S. Mamaloukos, "Observations on the Doors and Windows in Byzantine Architecture," in *Masons at Work: Architecture and Construction in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. R. Ousterhout, R. Holod, and L. Haselberger (Philadelphia, 2012), <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/ancient/masons/mamaloukos.pdf>, does not deal with the question of curtains used in conjunction with such openings or with the existence of telltale markings on their frames that would be of interest here. I thank Kostis Kourelis for this reference.

16 Veronica Kalas, who has studied some of these complexes, assured me of this possibility in a personal communication. For a discussion of grooves indicating the positioning and articulation of a wooden door and its frame, see V. Kalas, "The 2004 Survey of the Byzantine Settlement at Selime-Yaprakhisar in the Peristrema Valley, Cappadocia," *DOP* 60 (2006): 287 and fig. 18.

17 Kalas, "Cappadocia's Rock-Cut Courtyard Complexes," 408–9.

18 See, e.g., L. Llewellyn-Jones, "House and Veil in Ancient Greece," in *Building Communities: House, Settlement and Society in the Aegean and Beyond; Proceedings of a Conference Held at Cardiff University, 17–21 April 2001*, ed. R. Westgate, W. Fisher, and J. Whitley (London, 2007), 252; Stephenson, "Veiling the Late Roman House," 18–19.

19 Sigalos, *Housing*, 75.

20 The use of curtains is confirmed by the rows of finger-shaped hooks for their suspension preserved in situ above the doors; see Caseau, "Experiencing the Sacred," 64, fig. 4.2; Stephenson, "Veiling the Late Roman House," 12, fig. 11.

21 H. van Thiel, *Die Rezension λ des Pseudo-Kallisthenes* (Bonn, 1959), 58.23–26: "εἰσελθόντες οὖν εἰς τὴν ἐβδόμην πύλιν—καὶ αὐτὴ ἐσκέπετο ὑπὸ κουρτίνων χρυσοῦφάντων—κρούσας οὖν ὁ εὐνοῦχος τῇ χρυσῇ ῥάβδῳ τὴν κλεῖδα τῆς πύλης εὐθὺς ἠνεώχθησαν ἡμῖν χρυσοὶ πύλῳνες."

22 See J. Elsner, "Closure and Penetration: Reflections on the Pola Casket," *Acta IR Norv* 26 (2013): 214.

find it at the doorways of audience or reception halls. A combination of curtain and door also had practical advantages, with the curtain preventing outsiders from gazing into the interior when the doors were open, but allowing some degree of light and air, depending on the fabric, to filter through during the day.<sup>23</sup> As such, it may have been employed in humbler abodes as well, for instance at the entrances of houses opening into a shared courtyard, but I have not yet been able to find evidence confirming this latter hypothesis.

In addition to interior doorways, the use of curtains is also regularly assumed in relation to wall niches or built-in cupboards (*toicharmaria*), which were relatively common features of domestic interiors, from the urban houses of late Byzantine Mistra to the village houses of the rural Peloponnese and the Aegean islands. While some of these niches may have been used for display, others were probably used for storage.<sup>24</sup> A curtain over a storage wall niche would have sheltered the contents from dust, insects, and the curious eyes of potential visitors, while fulfilling a decorative function at the same time. On the other hand, it would have offered no security, which makes one wonder if it would not have been more sensible to use a locking wooden door for storage wall niches instead, and indeed there is some written evidence to support the latter supposition.<sup>25</sup> In any case, published archaeological evidence in the form of scars on the walls that would confirm either or both of the proposed possibilities is at present not available.

Urban and rural housing units often consisted of a single, multifunctional room that served as the

main living, storage, and working area of the household. To my knowledge, physical evidence that curtains were employed as internal partitions in such spaces is exceedingly rare.<sup>26</sup> Based on the existence of opposing indentations on the side walls, the use of a dividing curtain has been postulated in the case of a hermit's cell near Bahçeli in Cappadocia.<sup>27</sup> In other cases, however, where internal partitions did exist, as in the so-called House A at Mistra, they took the form of semipermanent wooden or reed walls.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, using physical barriers to subdivide single-room houses into smaller units with a specialized function does not appear to have been the rule. As has been pointed out by Sigalos, among others, the use of the single room was more likely to have been organized sequentially, with different activities taking place in the same space but at different times, and perhaps spatially, with the more private functions allocated to the section of the room farthest from the entrance.<sup>29</sup> This, of course, does not preclude the installation of movable screens, including curtains, on special social occasions involving guests, especially in more affluent households like those of Mistra. In a manuscript illumination executed in Mistra in 1361/62 (Paris, BnF, gr. 135, fol. 9v), the children of Job are depicted feasting in the house of the eldest brother while a woman in the background hangs a purple curtain, patterned in red and with a cream lining, behind the diners (fig. 1). The curtain is employed here to create the impression of an enclosed, intimate, but nonetheless opulent space for the feast. Yet, given the theatricality and the spatial ambivalence of the scene (it is unclear whether the meal is taking place in an interior space or outdoors), as well as the possible non-Byzantine origin of the miniaturist,<sup>30</sup> how far can

23 See A. T. Croom, *Roman Furniture* (Stroud, 2007), 146, for the mention by Augustine of Hippo (354–430) of curtains (*vela*) used at the entrance of a school to ensure privacy. For representations of curtains shielding the entrance inside an open door, see, e.g., K. Weitzmann and G. Galavaris, eds., *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Illuminated Greek Manuscripts*, vol. 1, *From the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1990), figs. 281, 283 (Sinait. gr. 205, fols. 113v, 200v [1050–1075]: St. Luke and St. Mark).

24 A. Orlandos, “Τὰ παλάτια καὶ τὰ σπίτια τοῦ Μυστρά,” *ArchBME* 3 (Athens, 1937): 71–72; Sigalos, “Middle and Late Byzantine Houses,” 75–76, fig. 3.25; A. K. Vionis, *A Crusader, Ottoman, and Early Modern Aegean Archaeology: Built Environment and Domestic Material Culture in the Medieval and Post-Medieval Cyclades, Greece (13th–20th Century AD)* (Leiden, 2012), 328–29, figs. 10.2, 10.3.

25 M. Pichard, ed., *Le Roman de Callimaque et de Chrysorrhoe* (Paris, 1956), lines 571–73: “καί, τὸ κλειδὶν ἀναλαβὼν ἀπὸ τῶν προσκεφάλλων, ἐκείνο τοῦ δράκοντος βλέπει τὸ τοιχαρμάριν; τὸ τοιχαρμάριν ἀνοιξε...”

26 See Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 4:119, for the assumption that curtains “were hung across a room to be used as a divider for privacy.”

27 C. Jolivet-Lévy and N. Lemaigre Desmesnil, “Un établissement monastique rural près du village de Bahçeli (Cappadoce),” in *Archaeology of the Countryside in Medieval Anatolia*, ed. T. Vorderstrasse and J. Roodenberg (Leiden, 2009), 91.

28 Sigalos, *Housing*, 82.

29 Sigalos, “Middle and Late Byzantine Houses,” 60–61, 71, 72–74.

30 On the manuscript, its iconography, and the circumstances of its creation, see J. M. Andrews, “Imagery in the Aftermath of the Crusades: A Fourteenth-Century Illustrated Commentary on Job (Paris, B.N., ms. graecus 135)” (PhD diss., University of California,



Fig. 1. The children of Job feasting, *Book of Job*, 1361/62. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms. gr. 135, fol. 9v. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

we trust this representation, or any representation for that matter, as evidence for the use of curtains in the medieval Byzantine home? This question brings us now to the consideration of the artistic evidence.

### The Artistic Evidence

For the purposes of the present inquiry, I shall limit myself to observations based on and concerning depictions of what I would call “functional” curtains suspended from the doorways and other openings of

buildings. I shall not consider curtains depicted in the dado zone of Byzantine churches,<sup>31</sup> those employed as framing devices in representations of important saintly or historical figures,<sup>32</sup> nor those fancifully draped over and sometimes through the architectural background structures in narrative scenes.<sup>33</sup>

Los Angeles, 2002), and eadem, “Crossing Boundaries: Byzantine and Western Influences in a Fourteenth-Century Illustrated Commentary on Job,” in *Under the Influence: The Concept of Influence and the Study of Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. J. Lowden and A. Bovey (Turnhout, 2007), 111–19.

31 See, e.g., E. Bakalova, ed., *The Ossuary of the Bachkovo Monastery* (Plovdiv, 2003), fig. 2 (dado of the crypt’s apse). To date, no systematic study of the Byzantine examples exists comparable to John Osborne’s discussion of imitative curtains in the dado zone of medieval churches in Rome; J. Osborne, “Textiles and Their Painted Imitations in Early Medieval Rome,” *BSR* 60 (1992): 309–51.

32 See Eberlein, *Apparition regis*.

33 See M. Evangelatou, “Textile Mediation in Late Byzantine Visual Culture: Unveiling Layers of Meaning through the Fabrics of the Chora Monastery,” *DOP* 73 (2019): 299–353.

Even a superficial survey of middle and late Byzantine artistic contexts reveals that curtains were depicted in the doorways of churches, palaces, and houses, intimating that the action is taking place in an interior and, in the case of the churches, a sacred space (fig. 2).<sup>34</sup> In representations of secular settings, it is the activity depicted, rather than any specific architectural feature, that allows us at times to identify the function of the space with which the curtain is associated, be it an audience hall, an area used for dining, or a bedchamber (fig. 3).<sup>35</sup> In most instances, the depicted curtain simply marks the doorway, with figures shown passing through it only rarely.<sup>36</sup> In some cases, the curtain is employed to hide an observer—such as a young female attendant<sup>37</sup> or, more rarely, a male figure (fig. 4)—who is there to witness and thus affirm the action taking place in the main field of the image. Mati Meyer has discussed the theme of the curtained doorway framing a female observer, considering it an evocation of the *gynaikeion*, the women's domestic quarters, while at the same time ascribing to it—and to the curtain in particular—a typological significance alluding to Christ's Incarnation.<sup>38</sup> Latent theological symbolism aside, the use of the curtained doorway in association with

male, as well as female, figures should make us cautious about interpreting it as a pictorial reference to a specifically female architectural space. Moreover, one should keep in mind the dramatic potential of the curtain, which, being a permeable barrier, was an ideal means of clandestine observation, a characteristic that may have influenced its use in this particular iconographic context.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, while curtained doorways framing female figures might resonate with certain modern preconceptions about the physical seclusion of women in medieval Byzantium, this motif is best dissociated from the question of the actual existence of separate women's quarters in Byzantine houses, which remains open to the present day.<sup>40</sup> It also warrants mention that, as opposed to curtains suspended from doorways, representations of bed curtains and canopies are almost nonexistent in Byzantine art.<sup>41</sup>

Depicted curtains are usually endowed with loops or metal rings through which they are attached to horizontal bars made of either metal or wood (fig. 2). In a

34 M. G. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography (11th–15th Centuries)* (Leiden, 2003), 191.

35 Given that the examples are too numerous to cite, I will limit myself to one illustrative example in each case: Iveron 463, fol. 7r (late twelfth century), depicts a meeting between the king, Joasaph's father, and a pious satrap in an audience room marked by a curtained doorway; Dionysiou 587m, fol. 118v (eleventh century), shows Christ in the house of Lazarus, reclining next to a dining table, a curtained doorway behind him; Vatopedi 602, fol. 443v (late thirteenth century), depicts a Philistine shearing Samson's hair while he sleeps on Delilah's lap in a room whose entrance is marked by a curtain. For reproductions of the above, see S. Pelekanides et al., *Οι Θησαυροί του Αγίου Όρους: Εικονογραφημένα Χειρόγραφα*, 4 vols. (Athens, 1973–91), 2: fig. 59; 1: fig. 238; 4: fig. 180.

36 For example, a female attendant is sometimes shown passing through a curtained doorway in representations of the Birth of the Virgin, as seen in the southeastern chapel of the church of Hagia Sophia at Mistra (1350–75): see P. Kalamara and A. Mexia, eds., *The City of Mystras* (Athens, 2001), 85, fig. 96.

37 A female observer is depicted, for instance, in the Prayer of St. Anne at Daphni Monastery (late eleventh century); see J. Lowden, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (London, 1997), fig. 156, for a color reproduction.

38 M. Meyer, *An Obscure Portrait: Imaging Women's Reality in Byzantine Art* (London, 2009), 242–46.

39 This potential was also exploited in Byzantine literature. Consider, for example, the private interview between Alexios I Komnenos and Basil the Bogomil staged by the emperor around 1104 with the specific purpose of drawing out Basil's heretical views: a secretary hidden behind a curtain (*παραπέτασμα, πέτασμα*) recorded everything that was said. See D. R. Reinsch and A. Kambylis, eds., *Annae Comnenae Alexias* (Berlin, 2001), 15.8.5.1–6.2 (p. 487).

40 See Kalas, "Cappadocia's Rock-Cut Courtyard Complexes," 409 and n28, with additional references. One perhaps should point out that in wealthier homes and in the palace, women, just like men, could have their own bedchambers. Whether these should be identified as "women's quarters," however, is an entirely different matter.

41 The only representation I have managed to locate so far is that of the textile canopy of the cradle of the Virgin in the depiction of her birth at the Protaton, Mount Athos (ca. 1300); see D. Salpistes and E. Tsigaridas, eds., *Μανούλη Πανσέληνος ἐκ τοῦ ἱεροῦ ναοῦ τοῦ Πρωτάτου* (Thessalonike, 2008), fig. 118. A possible echo of the use of bed curtains may be discerned in the curtains framing the scene of the Begetting of Cain at San Marco, Venice (thirteenth century); see Meyer, *Obscure Portrait*, fig. 1. Representations of bed curtains are more frequent in western European artistic contexts from the thirteenth century onward and are also occasionally encountered in the art of areas that had passed from Byzantine control into Latin rule, perhaps under the influence of western practices; see Gervers, "An Early Christian Curtain," 73; P. Mane, "Le lit et ses tentures d'après l'iconographie du XIII<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle," *MÉFRM* 111, no. 1 (1999): 393–418. For a tent-like bed curtain tied to a wooden beam depicted in the Last Judgment composition (fifteenth or sixteenth century) in the church of the Panagia at Moutoullas in Cyprus, which was under Latin rule at the time, see S. Perdikes and D. Myriantheus, *Ο ναός της Παναγίας στον Μουτουλλά* (Nicosia, 2009), fig. on p. 70 (the man who sleeps on a Sunday being attacked by demons).



Fig. 2. Ehud killing Eglon, king of Moab, in the king's summer parlor, *Octateuch*, late thirteenth century. Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos, cod. 602, fol. 409r. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Patriarchal Institute of Patristic Studies.

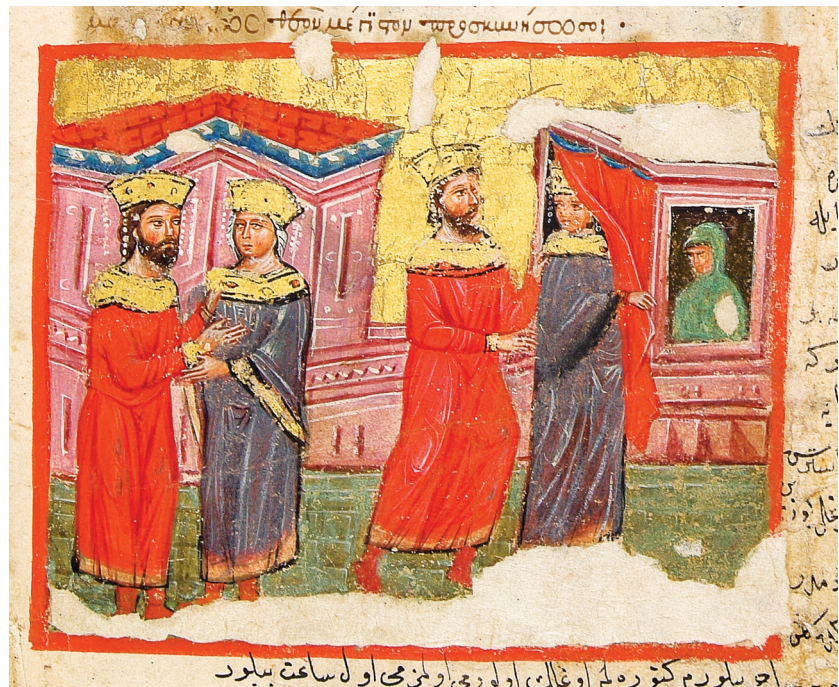


Fig. 3.  
Philip demands an heir and  
Olympias leads him to her chamber,  
*Alexander Romance*, fourteenth  
century. Hellenic Institute of  
Byzantine and Post-Byzantine  
Studies, Venice, cod. 5, fol. 6r.  
Artwork in the public domain;  
photograph courtesy of the  
Hellenic Institute of Byzantine and  
Post-Byzantine Studies, Venice.



Fig. 4. The preparations for the procession to the temple for the Virgin's Presentation, *Homilies of James Kokkinobaphos*, 1125–50. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms. gr. 1208, fol. 77v. Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

number of miniatures in the *Menologion* of Basil II, dated to the beginning of the eleventh century, this horizontal bar is secured in place by two brackets attached to the wall at either end (fig. 5).<sup>42</sup> When the curtains are depicted drawn, which is usually the case, they are shown either tied in a knot or secured on a hook attached to

one of the doorjambs or columns framing the opening (figs. 2 and 6).<sup>43</sup> Examples where the curtain is secured

42 *El "Menologio" de Basilio II emperador de Bizancio* (Vat. gr. 1613) (Vatican City, 2005), 30, 142, 146, 212. See also Parani, *Reconstructing*, 181.

43 Pantokrator 234, fol. 31r (ca. 1150), shows the Evangelist Luke before a curtained doorway with the curtain tied in a knot; see Pelekanides et al., *Θησαυροί*, 3: fig. 243. Vat. gr. 746, fol. 473v (twelfth century), depicts a curtained doorway in the summer parlor of Eglon, king of Moab, with the curtain secured in a side hook; see H. C. Evans and W. D. Wixom, eds., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843–1261* (New York, 1997), fig. on p. 192.

Fig. 5.  
The translation of the  
relics of St. James the  
Persian, *Menologion of  
Basil II*, beginning  
of eleventh century.  
Biblioteca Apostolica  
Vaticana, Vatican City,  
Ms. gr. 1613, p. 344.  
Artwork in the public  
domain; photograph  
© 2016 Biblioteca  
Apostolica Vaticana.



Fig. 6. St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Gregory of Nazianzos, *Homilies of St. Gregory of Nazianzos*, eleventh century. Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, cod. 61, fol. 113r. S. Pelekanides et al., *Οι Θησαυροί του Αγίου Όρους: Εικονογραφημένα Χειρόγραφα*, 4 vols. (Athens, 1973–91), 1: fig. 113. Artwork in the public domain; reproduced with permission of the Patriarchal Institute of Patristic Studies.



Fig. 7. Joasaph asks to leave the palace, *Barlaam and Joasaph*, late twelfth century. Iveron Monastery, Mount Athos, cod. 463, fol. 14r. S. Pelekanides et al., *Οι Θησαυροί του Αγίου Όρους: Εικονογραφημένα Χειρόγραφα*, 4 vols. (Athens, 1973–91), 2: fig. 62. Artwork in the public domain; reproduced with permission of the Patriarchal Institute of Patristic Studies.

to such a side hook by means of a textile band are comparatively uncommon (fig. 7).<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, when the curtain is depicted drawn, the upper part does not appear gathered to the side, but is shown extended over the entire width of the opening even when the mechanism of suspension comprises rings or loops attached to a horizontal bar (fig. 2). This would imply that the rings were somehow secured in place at either end of the rod; otherwise, one would expect the upper part of the drawn curtain to be gathered, at least partly, toward the side as well. This mode of representation certainly enhances the visual impact of the curtain, even when drawn, an effect that was apparently desirable in specific artistic contexts. Whether it was also a realistic touch, with Byzantine artists being (uncharacteristically) specific about such functional minutiae as the movement of curtain rings on a rod, remains unclear.<sup>45</sup>

The use of curtains in artistic contexts in association with sacred buildings, palatial structures, and houses goes back to the early Byzantine period,<sup>46</sup> when we also encounter the figure of the servant observing

the action from a curtained doorway.<sup>47</sup> Thus, one could argue that the occurrence of curtains in comparable middle and late Byzantine artistic contexts constitutes nothing more than the repetition of an iconographic topos. Indeed, the recognizability of the curtain and its pictorial and symbolic potential could have ensured its continuous reproduction in art independently of actual practices in everyday contexts. Still, when one compares the medieval depictions to their early Byzantine antecedents, one observes some important divergences that may be significant and could intimate some connection to medieval Byzantine realities. To begin with, while early Byzantine curtains as a rule are depicted as white, the curtains in middle and late Byzantine artistic contexts are overwhelmingly red, purple, blue, and, more rarely, green (figs. 2–8).<sup>48</sup> The tendency toward brightly colored curtains may have been dictated by the favored palette of medieval Byzantine artists or by the symbolic connotations of colors like red and purple, which evoked wealth and status or, in Christological and Mariological scenes, the Incarnation. There are, however, other possible explanations. The rich tones of these curtains imply that they are silk and wool, materials that held dye far better than linen, the fiber that

44 See also Weitzmann and Bernabò, *Byzantine Octateuchs*, figs. 243–44, 250–52, 266–67.

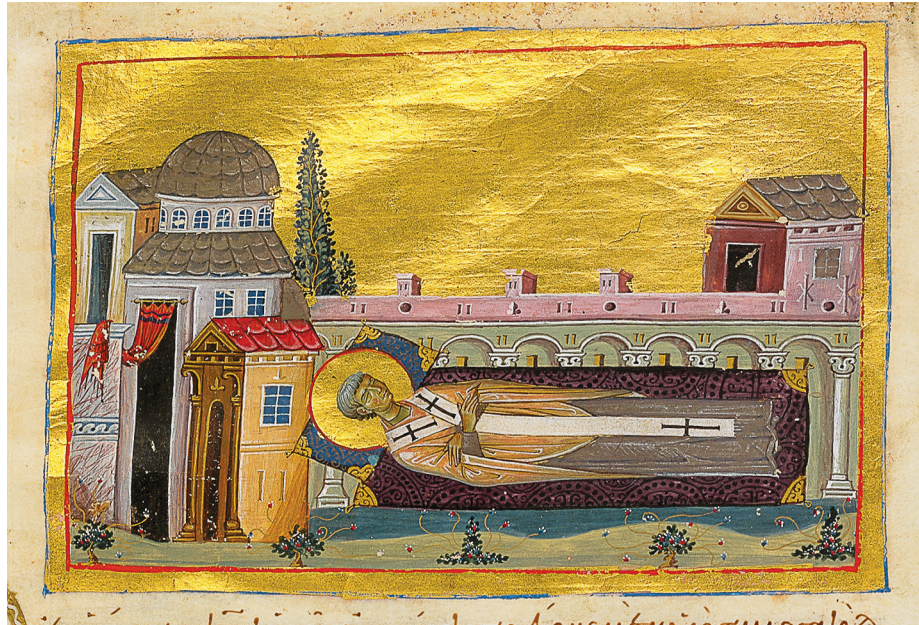
45 I am grateful to Eunice Dauterman Maguire for alerting me to this problematic aspect of the representations.

46 See, e.g., B. Brenk, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in S. Maria Maggiore zu Rom* (Wiesbaden, 1975), figs. 41.2, 47; F. W. Deichmann, *Frühchristliche Bauten und Mosaiken von Ravenna* (Wiesbaden, 1995), figs. 107–10, 168, 196, 358.

47 A. Terry and H. Maguire, *Dynamic Splendor: The Wall Mosaics in the Cathedral of Eufrosius at Poreč* (University Park, PA, 2007), figs. 126, 132 (Visitation, dated to 543–553).

48 Parani, *Reconstructing*, 183.

Fig. 8.  
The Dormition of St. Ignatios  
the Younger, *Menologion of  
Basil II*, beginning of eleventh  
century. Biblioteca Apostolica  
Vaticana, Vatican City, Ms. gr.  
1613, p. 134. Artwork in the  
public domain; photograph  
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Apostolica Vaticana.



had been extensively used for the manufacturing of curtains in early Byzantium.<sup>49</sup> Could this change in color scheme be an echo of a more widespread use of wool and silk for the manufacture of curtains in the Middle Ages? If so, what could have instigated such a change, provided that both silk and wool had been available in early Byzantine times as well? Perhaps it reflected a shift in the function of the curtains and in the types of spaces in which they were hung. Early Byzantine light-colored curtains allowed light and air to filter in. As such, one can envision them suspended in spaces where the need for privacy and protection from the sun's glare was balanced by the desire to allow light and breezes to come through—spaces like the open porticoes surrounding the peristyle courtyards of late antique houses.<sup>50</sup> Middle and late Byzantine houses did not have peristyle courtyards. It is reasonable to assume that changes in domestic architecture, which affected the natural lighting and airing of interior spaces as well as the circulation of the inhabitants, could have impacted the use of curtains. Dark-colored curtains were meant to keep

most of the light out and, depending on their texture, the heat in. They were therefore more appropriate for an enclosed living space like a bedchamber, rather than an open one like a portico. They were also better suited to spaces where subdued lighting might have been deemed desirable for the creation of a mystical atmosphere, with imperial audience halls coming readily to mind. Could it be, then, that the middle and late Byzantine depictions of curtains indicate changes of location and function? Or are their dark colors to be attributed to the possible sources of inspiration of medieval Byzantine artists, such as imperial ceremonial, during which—as we know from written sources—dark-colored curtains, especially red and purple ones, were used?<sup>51</sup>

We can never know for certain, but the decoration of curtains depicted in medieval Byzantine images suggests that the artists were not simply reproducing earlier pictorial models, but were inspired by actual material objects. Instead of the decorative *orbiculi* (circular attachments), *gammadia* (L-shaped attachments), and *segmenta* (square and other types of decorative attachments) of the early Byzantine examples, curtains in middle and late Byzantine images are adorned with broad border bands of a contrasting color of gold,

49 See M. Harlow, "Female Dress, Third–Sixth Century: The Messages in the Media?," *AntTard* 12 (2004): 210. In antiquity, linen was, as a rule, either left undyed or bleached; see, e.g., A. Lorquin, *Les tissus coptes au Musée national du Moyen Age, Thermes de Cluny* (Paris, 1992), 20.

50 See Stephenson, "Veiling the Late Roman House," 21.

51 Parani, *Reconstructing*, 179–80, 182–83, 184. I thank Henry Maguire for drawing my attention to the functional difference between light- and dark-colored curtains.

blue, red, or white at the top and/or the bottom, while the main field of the curtain usually remains plain. Decorative motifs, when they do occur, usually include two or three parallel stripes at the top and the bottom and, occasionally, small-scale repeated motifs, such as spades, circles, arrows, and stars (figs. 2 and 6). Designs featuring great medallions or other large-scale motifs are almost nonexistent.<sup>52</sup> In terms of decoration, the curtains are relatively plain when compared with other textile furnishings depicted in contemporary monuments, as illustrated, for instance, by the rather plain red curtain and elaborately patterned bedding of the bier of St. Ignatios the Younger depicted in the *Menologion of Basil II* (fig. 8). This also holds true for curtains that are shown hanging down freely, as seen in a second example of a curtain from the *Menologion*, which is adorned with a diaper pattern enclosing small-scale stylized lilies (fig. 5).<sup>53</sup> The implication is that Byzantine artists' tendency toward simple linear or small-scale ornamentation was not necessarily determined by practical considerations alone, namely the challenge of rendering a large-scale pattern when the curtain was shown gathered to the side. Given that a curtain normally had rich, supple folds and, when not used as a screen, was meant to be pulled to the side regularly to allow access, the visual effect of a large-scale pattern would have been diminished as a result. This is why, I would suggest, the decoration of depicted curtains with horizontal bands, stripes, and small-scale ornaments may have been, at least to begin with, a realistic touch, inspired by medieval examples with a different decorative scheme than their early Byzantine counterparts.<sup>54</sup>

All in all, one could claim that middle and late Byzantine images of curtains can help us visualize the appearance, decoration, and some of the modes of suspension of actual curtains. They might also indicate possible changes in the popularity of various materials and of color and decorative schemes from one period to another. More importantly, I would argue, they may alert us to shifts in the function of curtains and offer us an idea of the spaces, however artistically imagined and

abstractly represented, where their presence might have been considered fitting. The formal reception hall and, especially, the bedchamber emerge as such places. What the artistic evidence does not tell us is how widespread the use of domestic curtains was in terms of geographic, social, and temporal distribution during the periods that concern us here. Pending future archaeological discoveries, we must rely on the written evidence, to which we now turn.

## The Written Evidence

The most common terms denoting curtains in Byzantine texts were *belon* (βῆλον, from classical Lat. *velum* = cloth, covering, awning, curtain, veil), *parapetasma* (παραπέτασμα, from classical Gr. παραπετάννυμαι = to be hung before), and, less frequently, *ko[u]rtina* (κο(υ)ρτίνα, from late Lat. *cortina* = curtain).<sup>55</sup> As compared with *belon*, *ko[u]rtina* probably referred to a greater stretch of curtain.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the term *belothuron* (βηλόθυρον, from βῆλον [curtain] + θύρα [door]), which appears in this form in Byzantine texts only from the eleventh century onward,<sup>57</sup> had the more specific meaning of a door curtain, though in some later texts, such as the fourteenth-century treatise on late Byzantine court ceremonial by pseudo-Kodinos, it referred to curtains in

55 For a more detailed discussion of the Byzantine terminology of curtains, see Parani, "Mediating Presence," with additional references.

56 That the term κο(υ)ρτίνα could refer to a very long curtain is implied by a comment of Kosmas Indikopleustes apropos the biblical tabernacle: "Ἦσαν δὲ (αἱ αὐλαῖαι) ὡς κορτίνας ἐπιμήκεις· εἴκοσι ὀκτὼ πῆχεων ἦν τὸ μήκος τῆς μιᾶς καὶ τέσσαρες πῆχεις τὸ πλάτος"; see Kosmas Indikopleustes, *Topographie chrétienne*, ed. W. Wolska-Conus, 3 vols. (Paris, 1968–73), 2:55. It should perhaps be noted that, at least in the *De ceremoniis*, the term κο(υ)ρτίνα is clearly distinguished from the more commonly used term βῆλον; see Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *Le Livre des Cérémonies*, ed. A. Vogt, 2 vols. (Paris, 1935–40), 1:141: "τὰ ἐκεῖσε ὄντα βηλά τε καὶ κορτίνας." For the distinction between κο(υ)ρτίνα and βῆλον, with the former being the larger, see also M. Martiniani-Reber, "Tentures et textiles des églises romaines au haut Moyen Âge d'après le *Liber pontificalis*," *MÉFRM* 111, no. 1 (1999): 291. The possibility that κο(υ)ρτίνα designates a great stretch of curtain was first pointed out by P. Koukoules, *Βυζαντινῶν Βίος καὶ Πολιτισμός*, 6 vols. (Athens, 1948–57), 2.2:87–88.

57 For the occurrence of the related term οὐλόθυρον in an ecclesiastical inventory of the fifth or sixth century from Egypt, see B. Caseau, "Objects in Churches: The Testimony of Inventories," in *Objects in Context, Objects in Use*, ed. L. Lavan, E. Swift, and T. Putzeys (Leiden, 2007), 563.

52 Parani, *Reconstructing*, 183 and nn138–42 for references to characteristic examples.

53 See also Weitzmann and Galavaris, *Monastery of Saint Catherine*, color plate XVI:C and fig. 279 (Sinait. gr. 205, fol. 45v; St. Matthew, 1050–75).

54 Parani, *Reconstructing*, 183–84.

general.<sup>58</sup> There are surprisingly few references to the use of curtains in mundane contexts, as opposed to imperial and ecclesiastical ritual. They occur incidentally and are far less informative than one would like, each attestation posing its own problems of reliability and interpretation. In his tenth-century *Oneirokritikon* (book on dream interpretation), Achmet dedicates a section to the meaning of curtains (*bela*) and carpets in dreams, “according to the Indians, the Persians, and the Egyptians.” He speaks of curtains of various densities and sizes and implies that there were households without such furnishings.<sup>59</sup> Still, one is skeptical about using this passage as evidence for middle Byzantine practices, given the dependence of the *Oneirokritikon* on Muslim Arabic textual sources and the well-documented use of the domestic curtain in the Islamic East.<sup>60</sup> Of course, it is more than likely that some Byzantine households used curtains and others did not, and that their material attributes would have differed according to the context of their use. Thus, in the late twelfth century, Niketas Choniates informs us, the decadent *protosebastos* Alexios Komnenos used purple curtains (*parapetasmata, pepla*) in his bedchamber to shut

off excess light in order to sleep late.<sup>61</sup> The passage does not seem to be referring to bed curtains, but to actual curtains suspended from openings through which sunlight would enter, though these are not specified. But how widespread was the use of curtains in the bedchamber and elsewhere in the Byzantine home?

If we are to trust the complaints of Liudprand of Cremona, apparently no curtains warmed the house that had been assigned to him during his embassy to Constantinople in 968 and which he describes as being “wide-open,” affording no protection “from heat, rain or cold.”<sup>62</sup> Whether this absence was part of the Byzantines’ attempt to murder him by maltreatment, as the acerbic bishop would have us think, or whether curtains were simply not that common outside the imperial palace is not possible to determine. Middle and late Byzantine descriptions of actual aristocratic palaces are very rare and, as far as I know, do not include any references to curtains. On the other hand, there might be a reference to domestic curtains in the fourteenth-century compilation of secular law by Constantine Harmenopoulos, known as the *Hexabiblos*. In the section on building regulations, the Byzantine jurist recommended to those who wished to stop their neighbors from looking into their homes to use *surta* (συρτά, from σύρω = to draw), which the modern editor of the text interprets as curtains, influenced, most likely, by the *surta bela* (drawn curtains) mentioned in the tenth-century *De cerimoniis*.<sup>63</sup> Though curtains would have certainly protected the privacy of homeowners, in this specific context the term *surta* may refer to *kankella* (κάγκελλα), a type of sliding railing, rather than to a fabric screen.

Curtains, in contrast to other precious textile furnishings, are also conspicuously absent from the descriptions of imaginary palaces in the epic poem

58 R. Macrides, J. A. Munitiz, and D. Angelov, *Pseudo-Kodinos and the Constantinopolitan Court: Offices and Ceremonies* (Farnham, UK, 2013), 134, 144, 234. See the late Byzantine scholion to Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, l. 938a, employing the term βηλόθυρον to disambiguate the classical Greek term παραπέτασμα; M. Chantry, ed., *Scholia in Aristophanem*, pt. 3, *Scholia in Thesmophoriazusas, Ranas, Ecclesiazusas et Plutum*, fasc. 1B, *Scholia recentiora in Aristophanis Ranas* (Groningen, 2001), 166. I thank Prof. Georgios Xenis for this reference.

59 F. Drexler, ed. *Achmetis Oneirocriticon* (Leipzig, 1925), 260: “Ἐκ τῶν Ἰνδῶν, Περσῶν καὶ Αἰγυπτίων περὶ βήλων καὶ καλυμμάτων ἦτοι ταπήτων. . . ἐάν τις ἀσυνήθως ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ βῆλα κρεμάμενα ἴδῃ, εὐρήσει θλίψιν καὶ ἀγανάκτησιν μεγάλην. εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἦν ἡ πῆξις τοῦ ἔργου τῶν βήλων καὶ τὸ εὖρος καὶ τὸ μέγεθος πλείστον, ἔσται καὶ ἡ θλίψις δριμυτέρα καὶ μακροτέρα εἰ δ’ ἀραιότερα καὶ βραχύτερα ἦσαν ταῦτα, ἀναγκαίως βραχεῖα ἔσται ἡ θλίψις.”

60 On the sources of the *Oneirokritikon*, see M. Mavroudi, *A Byzantine Book on Dream Interpretation: The Oneirocriticon of Achmet and Its Arabic Sources* (Leiden, 2002). On the use of curtains in the Islamic East, see L. Golombek, “The Draped Universe of Islam,” in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World: Papers from a Colloquium in Memory of Richard Ettinghausen*, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2–4 April 1980, ed. P. P. Soucek (University Park, PA, 1988), 30–32; G. Cornu, “Rideaux et tentures dans le monde arabo-islamique oriental jusqu’à l’époque mamlûke,” *MÉFRM* 111, no. 1 (1999): 307–22; G. Helmecke, “Textiles for the Interiors: Some Remarks on Curtains in the Written Sources,” in De Moor and Fluck, *Clothing the House*, 48–53.

61 Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, ed. J. L. van Dieten, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1975), 1:244: “ἵνα μὴ τὸ ἀσπασιώτατον τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις ἡλίου βλέφαρον τὰς ἐκείνου κόρας ὑπανοίγῃ διαφωτίζον, παραπετάσμασι στεγανωτέροις ἐκζοφῶν τὸ δωμάτιον, ἐν ᾧ ἐκάθευδε, . . . τάπησι καὶ πέπλοις ἀλουργέσι τὸ φῶς ἀντέφραττε.”

62 *The Complete Works of Liudprand of Cremona*, trans. P. Squatriti (Washington, DC, 2007), 247.

63 Constantine Harmenopoulos, *Πρόχειρον Νόμων ἢ Ἐξάβιβλος*, ed. K. G. Pitsakes (Athens, 1971), 2.4.59 (p. 129): “αὐτὸς δὲ τὰ ἑαυτοῦ ἀσφαλιζέτω οἰκήματα, καὶ ἀθεώρητα φυλαττέτω, εἴτε διὰ τῶν ἀνοικτῶν καλουμένων καγκέλλων, εἴτε διὰ τῶν συρτῶν.” On the συρτά βῆλα, see Featherstone, “Chrysotriklinos,” 849 and n15.

*Digenes Akrites* (which probably dates to the twelfth century) and in medieval Byzantine romances, with one notable exception.<sup>64</sup> In the first part of the early fourteenth-century vernacular romance *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe*, the hero ventures into the castle of an ogre. In the castle's enchanting garden, Kallimachos sees a marvelous bath building, which he enters. From the inner door of the bath is suspended a door curtain (*belothuron*), wondrous to behold, made of a fabric adorned with lilies and roses that appear to be real.<sup>65</sup> A curtain within the context of a bath building would not only have ensured the privacy of the bathers, but would have stopped the heat inside from escaping; whether such curtains were in fact employed in actual bath buildings is a different question.<sup>66</sup> It is in the intimacy of this bath with its extraordinary door curtain, evoking the pleasures of the garden outside, that Kallimachos and the heroine, Chrysorrhoe, consummate their love for the first time. Later in the novel, Chrysorrhoe, now a captive of a foreign king, requests the construction of a pavilion in the king's garden, where she could withdraw. This pavilion—which, according to Panagiotis Agapitos, reflects Chrysorrhoe's desire to reconstruct the erotic bath of the ogre's castle, where she had been

happy with her lover<sup>67</sup>—is outfitted with a mattress (*stroman*) and surrounded by a beautifully adorned curtain (*kortinitza*, *kourtina*) made of golden thread.<sup>68</sup> The use of the term *ko[u]rtina* here indicates a long stretch of curtain, apparently suitable to enclose an area within the garden containing the mattress, and certainly longer than the *belothuron* suspended from the door in the bath building. Indeed, this description brings to mind the great curtain depicted in Paris. gr. 135 (fig. 1) rather than the countless door curtains depicted in Byzantine artistic contexts. Whatever the case, it is in this pavilion that Kallimachos, disguised as a gardener, finally finds Chrysorrhoe again and where they secretly resume their amorous activities.<sup>69</sup> In both instances, the curtain's connection with lovemaking, an intimate activity that in real life was associated primarily with the bedchamber, seems to me evocative.

By far, the most extensive reference to curtains comes from another work of narrative fiction, the so-called *Entertaining Tale of Quadrupeds*, a satirical dialogue between animals ascribed to the second half of the fourteenth century. According to its translators Nick Nicholas and George Baloglou, it was composed in a region still under Byzantine jurisdiction at the time, rather than an area under Latin or Ottoman rule, as is sometimes argued.<sup>70</sup> In this animal conference, the sheep speaks proudly of the products made of wool, among them “fair curtains (*kourtinai*), finely decorated, with sundry pretty forms designed on them:

64 On literary descriptions of aristocratic palaces, real and imaginary, and their decoration, see L.-A. Hunt, “Comnenian Aristocratic Palace Decorations: Descriptions and Islamic Connections,” in *The Byzantine Aristocracy, IX to XIII Centuries*, ed. M. Angold (Oxford, 1984), 138–56, and T. Tanoulas, “Ὁραμὶ ἐρατεινόν: Architecture and Rhetoric (Eleventh–Fifteenth Centuries),” in *Byzantium Matures: Choices, Sensitivities, and Modes of Expression (Eleventh–Fifteenth Centuries)*, ed. C. Angelidi (Athens, 2004), 313–39.

65 Pichard, *Roman de Callimaque*, lines 336–40: “Ἐκφρασις τοῦ βηλοθύρου. Εἰς δὲ καὶ πάλιν τοῦ λουτροῦ τὴν ἐνδοτέραν θύραν βηλόθυρον ἐκρέμετο πρὸς τὸ λουτρὸν ἀρμόζον. Καὶ γὰρ ἦν τὸ βηλόθυρον κρίνων καὶ ῥόδων ἄνθη· τῆς τέχνης τὸ παράξενον οὐ συνεχώρει βλέπειν.”

66 This, apparently, is the only reference to a door curtain in relation to a “Byzantine” bath building; see A. Berger, *Das Bad in der byzantinischen Zeit* (Munich, 1982), 96. I am not aware of any Byzantine representations of the interiors of bath buildings that include curtains. The only image that comes to mind from the post-Roman world is the admittedly much earlier depiction of the so-called bathing beauty before an architectural background featuring two curtains, in the west hall at the Umayyad bath complex of Qusayr ‘Amra in Jordan (first half of the eighth century); see G. Fowden, *Qusayr ‘Amra: Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley, CA, 2004), 228–33, fig. 57.

67 See P. A. Agapitos, “The Erotic Bath in the Byzantine Vernacular Romance *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe*,” *CLMed* 41 (1990): 257–73. I am grateful to Prof. Agapitos for discussing with me the role of Chrysorrhoe's pavilion within the romance and its relation to the bath.

68 Pichard, *Roman de Callimaque*, lines 1869–81: “φρουντζᾶτον θέλω εὐμορφον νὰ ποίσετε εἰς τὸν κῆπον . . . καὶ κορτινίτζαν γύρωθεν. . . . Εὐθὺς φρουντζᾶτον καὶ νερὸν εὐρέθηκεν καὶ τρέχει· καὶ γύρωθεν εὐγενικὸν μαγνάδιον ὡς κουρτίαν χρυσογνημάτην, θαυμαστήν, παμπλούμιστον, ὡραίαν καὶ στρώμαν κείμενον ἐν γῇ μετὰ χαρίτων τῶσων . . .” According to David Jacoby (pers. comm.), the use of gold thread evokes a silken cloth.

69 For the pavilion, see C. Cupane, “Orte der Liebe: Bäder, Brunnen und Pavillons zwischen Fiktion und Realität,” in *Ekphrasis: La représentation des monuments dans les littératures byzantine et byzantino-slaves; Réalités et imaginaires*, ed. V. Vavřínek, P. Odorico, and V. Drbal (Prague, 2011), 175–77. I thank Margaret Mullett for this reference.

70 N. Nicholas and G. Baloglou, *An Entertaining Tale of Quadrupeds* (New York, 2003), 60–66.

people, birds, beasts, and all things of this world, and these are owned by queens, and kings as well, and counts and knights and others of their rank.”<sup>71</sup> Apart from the reference to material and decoration, the text offers no indication as to how or where within the house the curtains were meant to be used, though the term *kourtina* could imply that the reference is not to door curtains. What is particularly intriguing in this passage is the association of the curtains with owners who, judging by the terms employed to describe their ranks, were clearly Westerners;<sup>72</sup> the owners of woolen carpets, by contrast, are described immediately afterward as including Easterners and Byzantines, as well as Franks.<sup>73</sup> The overall dearth of references to curtains among Byzantine literary works seems to imply that they were not a common household item, but considering the highly selective coverage of realia in these texts, this is not conclusive.

There is one last category of written texts to consider, which by their nature are regarded as providing reliable information, free of rhetorical exaggeration and literary license: the corpus of Byzantine monastic *typika* (foundation documents) and archival documents, such as wills and acts related to dowries or inheritances, which have come down to us mostly from the eleventh to fifteenth century. Because of accidents of survival, the corpus is biased in terms of its chronological and geographical coverage, with some periods and areas being overrepresented, while others hardly feature in it at all. Within the framework of the collaborative project “Artefacts and Raw Materials in Byzantine Archival Documents” (ByzAD), published collections of such documents were surveyed for the identification of references to secular and religious artifacts, which were then

collected in an electronic database.<sup>74</sup> Of the approximately two hundred documents included in this database, twenty-eight list one or more textile household furnishings used either for the bed, the bath, or the table. The number rises to thirty-two if we add references to textiles, including silks, of unspecified function.<sup>75</sup> Among these, only four documents, all dated to the fourteenth century, include securely identified references to curtains (*kortinai*). Specific references to door curtains (*belothura*) also appear, but judging by the context, they were meant for use in the church, not the home.<sup>76</sup>

One of the four documents explicitly mentioning curtains is the will composed in 1325 by the *skouterios* Theodore Sarantenos from Berroia, a wealthy member of the provincial aristocracy of Byzantine Macedonia. The document indicates that he owned three new curtains (*kortinai*),<sup>77</sup> which are listed after three veils or kerchiefs (*magnadia*) adorned with gold and before two luxurious bed pillows (*pilotopsidia*).<sup>78</sup> There is no indication in the text as to the appearance of the curtains or where and when they were meant to be suspended. They must have been considered valuable, since they are listed among other costly textile furnishings. That curtains could be expensive is confirmed by the will of the *megas stratopedarches* Demetrios Tzamlakon, composed in Thessalonike in 1366/67, in which he mentions more than one curtain (*kortinai*) given to him as a pledge by one Asanes, just before he goes on to describe a bed canopy (*ouranos*) with gold embroidery.<sup>79</sup> Also in Thessalonike in the second half of the fourteenth century, bed curtains formed part of the possessions of the late Manuel

71 M. Papathomopoulos, ed., *Διογένους Παιδιόφραστος διήγησις τῶν ζῶων τῶν τετραπόδων* (Athens, 2010), lines 488–92 (p. 129): “Ποιοῦν κουρτίνας εὐμορφας, ὡραιοπλουμισμένας, καὶ σχηματίζουσιν καὶ ποιοῦν εἶδη καὶ θεωρίας, ἀνθρώπους, ζῶα καὶ πτηνὰ καὶ πάντα τὰ τοῦ κόσμου. Καὶ ἔχουσιν ταὶ ῥήγαινες ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ ῥηγάδες, κόντοι καβαλαρίοι τε καὶ ἄλλοι μετ’ ἐκείνους”; English trans., Nicholas and Baloglou, *Entertaining Tale*, 187.

72 Nicholas and Baloglou, *Entertaining Tale*, 311 (commentary on line 492).

73 “ὁ σουλτάνος καὶ ὅλοι οἱ ἀμιράδες . . . Ῥωμαῖοι τε καὶ Φράγκοι.” Papathomopoulos, *Διογένους Παιδιόφραστος διήγησις*, lines 493–96 (p. 129); Nicholas and Baloglou, *Entertaining Tale*, 187.

74 L. Bender, M. Parani, B. Pitarakis, J.-M. Spieser, and A. Vuilloud, *Artefacts and Raw Materials in Byzantine Archival Documents/ Objets et matériaux dans les documents d’archives byzantins*, <http://typika.cfeb.org>.

75 Ibid., s.v., πανίν, ὕφασμα, βλατὴν [sic].

76 ByzAD, artefacts #889, 891, 892, 1269, 1900, 2101, 2564, 3127.

77 ByzAD, artefact #1974; see J. Bompairé, J. Lefort, V. Kravari, and C. Giros, eds., *Actes de Vatopédi*, vol. 1, *Des origines à 1329* (Paris, 2001), 355 line 59: “κορτίνας τρεῖς καινούργιαι.”

78 ByzAD artefacts #1973 (μαγνάδια), 1975, 4343 (πιλωτοψίδια).

79 ByzAD artefacts #3195, 3196; see R. Estangüi Gómez, “Les Tzamlakônes, grands propriétaires fonciers à Byzance au 14<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *REB* 72 (2014): 324: “κορτίνας, ἃς δέδωκέ μοι ὁ Ἀσάνης ἐνέχυρον λόγῳ ἑαυτοῦ. οὐρανὸς χρυσὸς σεσυρμένος εὐρίσκεται παρ’ ἡμῖν.” The gold embroidery of the canopy intimates that the latter was probably made of silk (D. Jacoby, pers. comm.).

Deblitzenos, which a document of 1384 states were to be given to his widow, Maria, as part of the restitution of her dowry. The curtains are included among the bedding: one *kortina* was valued at six *hyperpyra*, a moderate amount, while a set consisting of a silk curtain and bed canopy (*kortina*, *ouranos*), identified as being very old, was also valued at six *hyperpyra*, probably a fraction of its value when new.<sup>80</sup> No wooden bedstead is listed among the belongings of the Deblitzenoi, a fact that led Oikonomides to assume that they did not own one.<sup>81</sup> Even if this was the case, the absence of a bedstead would have posed no problem for the suspension of the canopy, which could have been attached with ropes to the ceiling, or the curtain, which could have been suspended from a rod fixed on the walls or the ceiling supports of the space where the Deblitzenoi made their bed.<sup>82</sup> The fourth and final reference to a curtain comes from a document listing the inheritance of one Andronikos Trichas living in Constantinople around 1400.<sup>83</sup> The curtain (*kortina*) appears at the end of the list after a table (*tabla*), but since the artifacts in the document are apparently not listed according to material or function, this tells us nothing about the use of this particular curtain. Looking at other published documents not included in the ByzAD database, references to curtains also seem to be mostly lacking.<sup>84</sup> A letter of 1137 from Seleucia in Asia Minor, however, mentions a bed with a canopy as part of the dowry of a well-to-do Jewish bride.<sup>85</sup> We cannot be certain, however, whether this example is indicative of current practices in Byzantine Asia Minor, or of adherence to a custom that the bride's family brought over from

Egypt, whence they hailed, and where bed canopies had been common in eleventh-century trousseaux.<sup>86</sup>

The scarcity of references to domestic curtains in Byzantine archival documents is in stark contrast to their frequent occurrence in the documents of the Cairo Geniza, amply testifying to their widespread use among Jewish households of the Islamic East.<sup>87</sup> In the Geniza documents, curtains often feature as part of the dowry of wealthy brides.<sup>88</sup> Though our meager Byzantine sample can hardly be regarded as representative, it is worth mentioning that no connection with dowries can be made for the curtains listed in our four documents: in each case the owner was male. Looking to the West, references to domestic curtains are also generally lacking from the archival materials of Byzantine and Norman southern Italy studied by Philip Ditchfield, with the exception of bed canopies and curtains, occurring in documents as early as the eleventh century; the bed curtains are designated by the term *cortina* in Latin and κο[u]ρτίνα in Greek.<sup>89</sup> Whether this represents a continuation of Byzantine custom into Norman times or new practices imported by the conquerors is unclear. One cannot help but wonder, however, whether the term κο[u]ρτίνα in the four Byzantine documents discussed above should be ascribed the same narrow definition of "bed curtain"; as we have seen, at least one of these Byzantine *kourtinai* was certainly used at the bed. If, as suggested earlier, *kourtinai* were long curtains, they could have encircled a bed without a problem.

How are we to interpret the evidence of the Byzantine archival documents, fragmentary as it is? It seems to me unlikely that curtains would have been omitted from the more comprehensive lists cataloguing textile furnishings if they had indeed formed part of the possessions of the households in question. Even if some of the still undecipherable terms employed in the documents for textile artifacts turn out to be references to curtains, the overall impression of scarcity will not be overturned. There remains the possibility that

80 ByzAD artefacts #493, 509, 510; see N. Oikonomides, ed., *Actes de Docheiariou* (Paris, 1984), 264, lines 28, 33: "κορτίνα εἰς ὑπέρπυρα ἔξ, . . . κορτίνα μεταξωτὴ παμπάλαια μετὰ ὁμοίου οὐρανοῦ εἰς ὑπέρπυρα ἔξ."

81 Oikonomides, "Contents of the Byzantine House," 209.

82 For various modes of suspension of canopies and bed curtains in western medieval art, see Mane, "Lit et ses tentures," 400–403.

83 ByzAD artefact #943; see MM 2:407: "τάβλαν καὶ κορτίαν."

84 There is, for instance, only one reference to curtains in the accounts and other documents published in P. Schreiner, *Texte zur spätbyzantinischen Finanz- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte in Handschriften der Biblioteca Vaticana* (Vatican City, 1999): the three curtains for a marital bed (σπερβέριν) included in the dowry of a bride in Venetian Crete in the first half of the fifteenth century (219–20).

85 S. D. Goitein, "A Letter from Seleucia (Cilicia) Dated 21 July 1137," *Speculum* 39 (1964): 299. On bed canopies in the trousseau lists of Jewish brides, where they appear only down to the twelfth century (at least in the East), see idem, *Mediterranean Society*, 4:117.

86 See previous note. For the Jewish communities of Asia Minor and their relation to Egypt, see D. Jacoby, "What Do We Learn about Byzantine Asia Minor from the Documents of the Cairo Geniza?," in *Η βυζαντινὴ Μικρά Ἀσία (6ος–12ος αἰ.)*, ed. S. Lampakes (Athens, 1998), 83–95.

87 Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 4:118–22.

88 Ibid., 4:119–20.

89 P. Ditchfield, *La culture matérielle médiévale: L'Italie méridionale byzantine et normande* (Rome, 2007), 83–84.

some of the other types of textile furnishings listed in the documents doubled as curtains or bed curtains if the need arose. A saint's *vita* dated to the ninth century alerts us to this likelihood. When Niketas Patrikios had to stay confined to bed after a fall, he could find no peace because of the mosquitoes incessantly biting him. In order to give him respite, the brothers of his monastery used himatia (possibly their mantles) to surround his bed. The result was that the saintly old man, saved from the mosquitoes, suffered from the resulting heat instead, since the himatia were apparently too densely woven to allow a cooling breeze to pass through.<sup>90</sup>

### Conclusions

The extent to which the documents discussed in the previous section may be regarded as representative of prevalent practices cannot be determined. Their small number certainly does not allow for generalizations regarding social, ethnic, geographical, or chronological patterns of use. Still, when their testimony is combined with the other evidence presented in this study, the impression one derives is that the use of curtains in the home was not as common in the middle and late Byzantine periods as we tend to assume. On the other hand, the emerging association of curtains with affluent households, especially in the urban centers of the empire, may be a result of the greater visibility of the middle and upper echelons of Byzantine society in the sources rather than actual practices.<sup>91</sup> Equally, given the geographic and chronological biases of the available data, the concentration of testimonies regarding the use of curtains in the late Byzantine period cannot be taken as significant, nor can one construct a case of possible western influence on Byzantine habits based solely on a reference found in the *Entertaining Tale of Quadrupeds*, especially since its Byzantine origin is contested.

Despite the limitations of the available evidence, however, one theme seems to be consistent throughout: the association of the curtain with the bed and

the bedchamber, which is borne out by the written and artistic evidence alike, and which seems to parallel practices in the medieval West, at least from the thirteenth century onward. The bed, and especially the marital bed, whether it involved a wooden bedstead or simply bedding placed directly on the floor or on a built bench, was central to the life of the household and its members, associated as it was with important events such as marriage, the conception and birth of children, and, finally, death.<sup>92</sup> East Syrian Christian marital customs, as early as the tenth century (if not earlier), included the "knotting" and "untying" of the nuptial chamber's curtain, which was blessed by a priest.<sup>93</sup> Though such customs are not attested in the heartlands of the empire, the connection between the curtain and the marital bed is evocative. Curtains screening the entrance to the bedchamber, in buildings where such a room existed, would have created an atmosphere of intimacy and would have helped safeguard the occupants' modesty and privacy when they were at their most human and most vulnerable. Bed curtains and canopies, whose primary function was to provide protection from mosquitoes, drafts, and dust falling from the ceiling,<sup>94</sup> could have served similar purposes. The advantages of the bed curtain would have been, one imagines, particularly appreciated in single-room houses. It could provide the desired protection and privacy while the household members slept, and then be put away during the day, liberating the space for the other activities of the inhabitants. Not least, the use of a bed curtain would have made the need for semipermanent divisions in single-room houses more or less redundant. If, as has been suggested here, there was indeed a relation with the bed and the bedchamber, the curtain naturally would have formed part of the daily life and experience of the women within the home. On the other hand, I have found no unequivocal evidence associating curtains with a specifically "female" space or for their use as a means of segregating the female from the male members of the household on a quotidian basis.

90 D. Papachryssanthou, "Un confesseur du second Iconoclisme: La Vie du patrice Nicétas (†836)," *TM* 3 (1968): 331 (§7).

91 On the low visibility of the poorer social strata in the archival documents of Byzantine and Norman southern Italy, see Ditchfield, *Culture matérielle*, 82.


92 Ibid., 74; Vionis, *Aegean Archaeology*, 329.

93 G. Radle, "The Development of Byzantine Marriage Rites as Evidenced by *Sinai Gr. 957*," *OCP* 78 (2012): 139–46. I am grateful to Gabriel Radle for bringing these traditions to my attention and for providing me with an offprint of his study.

94 Mane, "Lit et ses tentures," 399–400.

To conclude, I would stress that the study of the domestic curtain cannot be separated from the study of domestic space in general, and the practical, social, and cultural parameters that impacted its articulation and use. It is along these lines that such studies need to continue.

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